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Hugh Downs to Frank McGee:

THE BIG SWITCH ON THE TODAY SHOW

In mid-October, Frank McGee will replace Hugh Downs as host of the NBC Today show. Downs, like his predecessors on the program, Dave Garroway and John Chancellor, is a "cool" personality—easy, loose and slow to display anger. Frank McGee has a quite different manner. His movements are quick, his speech tends to be sharp.

Recently, I conducted a two-hour interview with McGee and Downs. It gives some hint of how the Today show is likely to change with the transfer of command.

Question: How do you feel about your freedom to say what you want to say on television?

Downs: There is a type of self-censorship that is most important to longevity in this business. In the same way that we wouldn't smoke in church, there are certain things, or ways of dealing with things, that I wouldn't do on the air. But I don't think it compromises any of my basic ideals. I certainly wouldn't say something on the air that I didn't believe.

McGee: Hugh, I don't think it's so much a matter of *saying* something you don't believe, as it is of *failing* to say something you *do* believe.

Downs: Well, that's true. I've never felt, "Gee, I wish I could call that one back." I've never felt that. But I've kept silent at times, and I've been haunted by the fact that I should have spoken.

McGee: In this matter of freedom of speech, you have to consider your qualifications. I don't seek to pop off on any given subject. I don't know enough. I don't think any of us has the expertise for that. I could not write the editorial page of the New York *Times* every day.

But there have been occasions when I would like to have said things—more things—than I have permitted myself to say.

Question: What concerns you most about television news coverage today?

McGee: At the moment? The attacks made upon it. I won't say it's an "orchestrated conspiracy." But clearly the Vice President has been the chief offender in this matter. Chief Justice Warren E. Burger was quoted as recalling the days when politicians used to horsewhip reporters. The first politician who tries to horsewhip me is going to get whipped in return.

I'm damned tired of having people who are not qualified, and who have no evidence to support them, gratuitously impute motives to me that I do not have. Or who assume I am approving or disapproving of something I report. I think there are charges that can validly be laid at the door of television news. I think we're shallow. I think we're brief. Part of this is built into the medium. There is just so much time available. Part of this could be corrected, I think.

However, these valid charges bother me less than the attack upon television itself.

The three branches of Government are quite properly jealous of *their* prerogatives and of the concept of government that separates *their* powers. But I would be arrogant enough to suggest that it is even more important that the press be separated from *them* than that they be separated from each other.

But, of course, Mr. Agnew is not really complaining about television news. What he's complaining about is criticism. If television news and the analyses that have been done on television were favorable to the Administration, he'd be the last one to open his mouth. So he's not really arguing about fairness or unfairness, bias or lack of bias, prejudice or lack of prejudice. What he's complaining about is criticism.

Now one more thing. It is absolutely vital that the people understand that you cannot censor the press. You can only censor the people. And when Agnew, or anybody like him, directly or indirectly attempts to intimidate and thereby alter the way news is presented, he doesn't give a damn about me and what I say. He's not trying to censor me. He's trying to censor the people. And they're the only ones who count. The freedom that the First Amendment guarantees is not my personal property. It was put in there for the benefit of the people. And it's crucial that they understand this and realize who has the most to gain by lying to the people—a reporter or a politician?

The precise moment that Mr. Agnew has any effect whatsoever on how *I* do any news story, including a story about him, he will, in part, have achieved his purpose. So I am bound and determined that he will not make me be more anti-Administration, or pro-Administration. Because if

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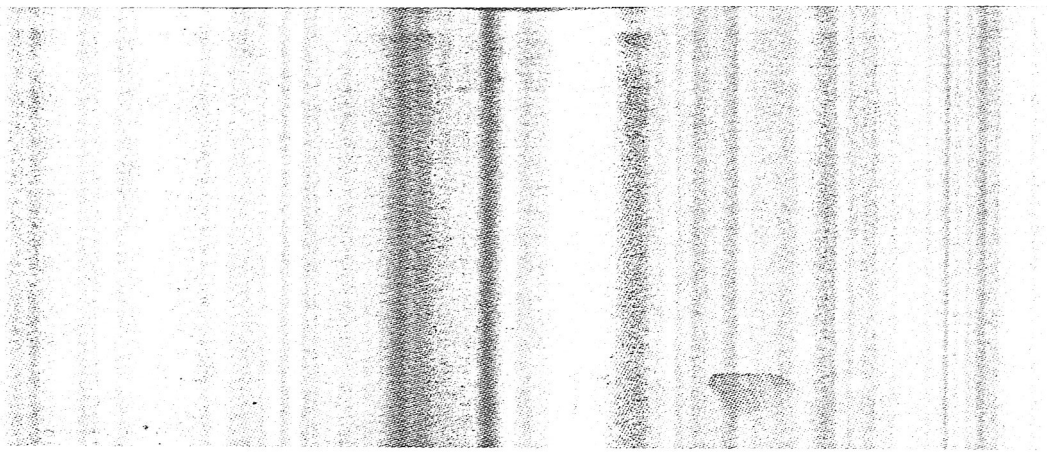
INTERVIEWED BY RICHARD BALLAD



he makes me more anti-Administration, he will also have altered my way of thinking. He shall not do that. He can change my thinking by the fair and reasoned content of his opinions, yes. But he will never change it by attacking the news media. By name-calling. By threats. I think we'll have a free press in this country long after Mr. Agnew has departed the scene, if we insist on this point.

Question: Frank, why did you choose to move out of the hard news and documentary field and into this unique area of television where news lives cheek by jowl with show business?

McGee: I hope this will not sound too egotistical. The fact is that for more than 20 years I have been doing hard news. Even the documentaries I've done have been based on hard news developments. Necessity has restrained me, quite effectively, to one dimension.

On some very rare occasions, at a convention or on an election night, or something like that, a little levity was allowed. But only a little. On those occasions, some idea of the whole person begins to come through, and the audience sees this. If they like what they see, they respond to it. Now when I substituted for you on *Today*, Hugh, I found it was very satisfying to sit there and be myself and not just part of myself. I enjoyed it. So it was more than one dimension. Maybe two, you know?

I don't want to butter you up, Hugh, but I don't think anybody could last on the *Today* show for nine years, as you have, if he were shallow. To constantly come up with something from out of yourself, day after day, is a severe test of a person's depth.

I thought of that recently during an interview with some newspaper people. They asked whether I would create a "new image" for the *Today* program. I told them I would not and that anyone who knew me would never really entertain such a possibility. I am cursed with the character I have. I cannot create a new one. Nor would I try.

Downs: It's really fatal if you do try to put on an act. But there is a weird tendency toward image-making in television. An image seems to crystallize around you like rime ice on the leading edge of your wing. When I was still doing *Concentration*, a lady in the audience said to me, "That wasn't like you to say 'damn' on the air." And I told her that whatever it was I said, it was like me. I have to display my true self. That's my duty to the viewing public. For example, if the idea gets around that I'm more bland than I really am—and I do tend to the bland side—it then behooves me to shake things up a bit. Spicing up my language now and then serves the purpose and merely broadcasts what I do, on occasion, anyway. I remember on the old *Tonight* show how Jack Paar, tongue-in-cheek, would promote the idea that there was some particular erudition attached to me. And this was amusing until I saw that some people were taking it seriously. That's dangerous. If you get an image that is pleasing to the ego and you begin to buy it, look out. The downfall of the magician is when he begins to believe in his own magic.

Question: Frank, what do you think will happen when you take over *Today*? Will you tend to express yourself more freely?

McGee: I don't know. I would expect to become more windy, perhaps. I might tend to revel in the new atmosphere. I could, however, go the other way. I could become so conscious of it that I might pull in my horns and be less opinionated.

Downs: That's very perceptive. I finally came to the conclusion that the world is not all that thirsty for my opinion. Besides, it's going to leak out, anyway, even if I don't say it in so many words. You know, the host role on *Today* is unique. You're an ugly duckling. You're not an entertainer. You're not a talk-show host. You're not—in my case—a newscaster. And in your case, Frank, you'll have to suppress the newscaster within you in order to meet the peculiar demands of the *Today* show job. There's not another job like it.

Question: Do either of you have any bad on-the-air habits that you'd like to break?

McGee: Yes. Sure. I interrupt people. Constantly. In line with that, let me tell you an amusing experience I had in the Aleutian Islands, which is not an amusing place. It was on Attu. I used to hang around the radio station because that's where I wanted to work.

One day we were sitting around this Quonset hut station, having a beer bust. Unknown to us, the chief engineer put on an acetate disc and started recording our conversation. Then he made us listen to the playback. I discovered that hardly a person had been able to complete a sentence without big-mouth McGee interrupting. That was over a quarter of a century ago and I still haven't licked it. But I think I'm a little better than I used to be.

Downs: Well, I could talk all day on that subject. Probably my worst habit is that I mumble. You're very good, Frank. You say it straight and sharp. But if I'm on unsure ground, I sometimes get a mumbling fit. Later, I'll listen to the tape and think, "Speak up, man."

Another thing—Joe Garagiola pointed out that when I get angry with a guest. . . .

McGee: What? Hugh Downs angry? On the air?

Downs: Yep. Joe says he can tell when it happens because I start calling the guest "sir." If it's a man, that is. So far I've never called a woman "sir," though I've been tempted a few times. Anyway, rage inspires me to formality. Maybe that's a TV news quality.

McGee: Maybe so. It's a sort of professional discipline, but it causes ulcers. I can tell you that from sad personal experience.

Downs: Fortunately, there isn't much to cause ulcers on our program. But I think what does aggravate me is to have a guest who is a roaring bigot, but who is also smooth, articulate and persuasive. That will get me going every time.

Question: Hugh, is there any subject you've wanted to take up that you've never been able to tackle on the *Today* program?

Downs: No, in my almost ten years, I really think we've dealt with just about everything. There are subjects on which I would like to do more. The American Indian, for example. But if you give such subjects the exposure they deserve, you wind up with a show that is out of proportion because there just isn't enough time. There is also the danger that something you feel strongly about may become an obsession. People tuning in often become so infuriated that you sometimes defeat your purpose.

For example, I tend to be quite radical about drugs and that irks some people. I think we have to get at the root causes of drug abuse and really bear down on the preventive aspects. Punishing

addicts and publishing exaggerated scare propaganda are techniques that have shown themselves to be counter-productive. Perhaps the President's new Special Action Office for Drug Abuse Prevention is a step in the right direction: the recruiting of young people to form a new peer-group motivation, the re-accrediting of research, and the dissemination of truth about all drugs, legal and illegal. The solution of the drug problem will not be found in harsher laws. That is what made Prohibition a failure.

Sensible legislation and then regulation is much more important and effective than outlawing something. Nobody can find out the extent of harm that marijuana may represent because research on the subject is sort of discredited. It's a taboo. Like VD research a century ago.

McGee: What gets me is that the mere fact that my generation opposes drugs makes it almost compulsive for some young people to use them. I don't know what can be done once you reach the point where respected figures who have done research and have arrived at sound, clinical conclusions about a drug have their findings dismissed simply because they are members of the Establishment. The suspicion is there, on the part of the drug abuser, that he's being lied to in order to prevent him from having a good time.

Question: You said that some drug users don't trust the results of research. Isn't some suspicion called for regarding Establishment pronouncements, when you consider how many respectable people and organizations have been caught lying lately? Isn't there some basis for the suspicion that "authority" isn't always authoritative?

McGee: I'll have to approach that circuitously. I have seen, from many directions, assaults upon our value systems. Assaults from within and without the Establishment. I don't like any of those who weaken the base of our collective assumptions about ourselves. But I also know that something has happened in this country in the past half-dozen years.

So much of it is traceable to the war in Vietnam. This war is the great lie of this century, so far as this country is concerned. And that fundamental lie, coupled with all the lies that have sprung from it, are, indeed, the basis for the lack of belief that various segments of the society have in other parts of it.

Those who have caused this, those who have capitalized upon it, be they young or old, white or black, they are the true villains.

Self-examination is good. It's vitally necessary. And good things come from it. But self-hatred is simply destructive. And self-hatred is rampant in this country.

On the other hand, those who would try to tell me that I'm not a patriot because I don't blindly approve of everything the Government does, when I know more about this country and have loved it for so long, in spite of its faults—well, such people annoy me very much. I will not allow them to tell me what patriotism is simply because I don't make the noises they want to hear. I'm not in their damned parade.

Downs: I can't view America as having a rotten core. There is plenty of rot in the rind, no doubt of that. But to jump to the conclusion that all is rotten is simply to push a self-fulfilling prophecy. I also feel strongly about the appropriation of the American flag on one hand and its desecration on the other. For a long time, I wore a little flag in my lapel. Several people said to me, "I didn't think you were a far rightist." Well, I'm not. Who said the Far Right owns the flag? Who said any group owns it?

Question: How do you feel about the future of America?

McGee: Well, I was talking, not long ago, with a man who was an immigrant and who is now an American citizen. He asked me, rather wistfully, whether I thought America could survive its excesses of the moment. I told him I thought that the Cassandras in our midst always get more attention than the Pollyannas. Yet, I must admit I'm not too sure of what's going to happen.

God knows I love this country. But I know, too, that it is really less important that America survive than that the good things that America represents survive. It's hard for me to say that. But we must remember that our deepest ideals are not solely, or even primarily, of our invention. We are merely the present caretakers for a set of moral, ethical and legal principles that have fallen into our hands for safekeeping. It is less important that we survive as a country than that these hard ideals and principles should continue to govern our lives.

Question: We've talked of youth. What about age, and aging?

Downs: I view it differently each year. I don't dread the concept of aging, as I once did. I know it's a problem for many people in a society that tends to reject the old, and the old values. But I'm not so sure that we are that much of a youth-oriented society. Some of the activities of the youth themselves may be demolishing that idea. I think the best really is yet to be. I think of myself at 25, and the emotional windmills I had to tilt, and the fear I had, and the hatred I had. Really, I'm much younger now, in many ways.

McGee: I have no interest in getting younger. I have been 16. I have been 35. Now I am 50. I have no desire to go back. I'm not the same person at 50 that I was at 35. Neither is my wife, thank God.

No, I want to live. And I know that means change. And I can't wait to see what the changes will be. I think old people have a lot to tell us. They say, "Take it a little easier. You don't have all the answers. It's not all that compelling that you do have all the answers. You'll find that you've wasted a lot of energy and time on a lot of things that really weren't worth it."

Question: What about the way older people are living? Many, perhaps most, of them are living apart from the other age groups. Grandma is not so eager to baby-sit anymore. And we are not so eager to have Grandpa live with us, or near us. Some old people say this is all the fault of our generation, which has neglected the old. How about that?

McGee: One of my cherished beliefs is that a man cannot be held in double jeopardy. And damn it, it seems to me that my generation, which is now middle-aged, is in double or even triple jeopardy. When I was a kid, if you turned out badly, well, it was your own fault. So said society. So I grew up and I didn't turn out too badly. Then I looked around and, guess what? Now they were telling me that if my kids turned out badly, it would not be their fault. It would be my fault. That's jeopardy number two, right? And finally, now I hear some old people saying that their lives are meaningless, barren and empty, and again, it's my fault. Jeopardy number three. By God, I've had enough jeopardy. I want everybody off my middle-aged back.

Question: One final question. Some people feel we are over-communicated. What are our communications doing for us, and to us? For example, are they endangering the jury system?

McGee: Well, in the first place, it was not intended that a jury be formed of those who had heard nothing about the case. It is only intended that a jury be formed of those who have *not* formed a *judgment.*

Now, for the larger question, concerning communications as a whole, I'd like to note first that there has long been a cliché that increased communications bring about increased understanding.

Never believe that.

Increased communications bring about increased misunderstanding. At least, initially.

We find that what we thought was true often is not true. That confuses us, annoys us and, finally, angers us. It's hard to readjust our attitudes. When you are constantly fed new information, attitudes must change. Consistency is often the result of ignorance, you know. Ultimately, it is possible that we will reach greater levels of understanding. But that doesn't mean that we will have greater harmony or that we will like each other more. I can understand you, Hugh, and you can understand me. But we can still hate each other.

Downs: It's the old joke. You've really got to know the guy to hate him. Ed Newman once remarked that perhaps there were certain groups that, in the interest of peace and harmony, should not communicate with one another at all. He was being half-facetious, but only half.

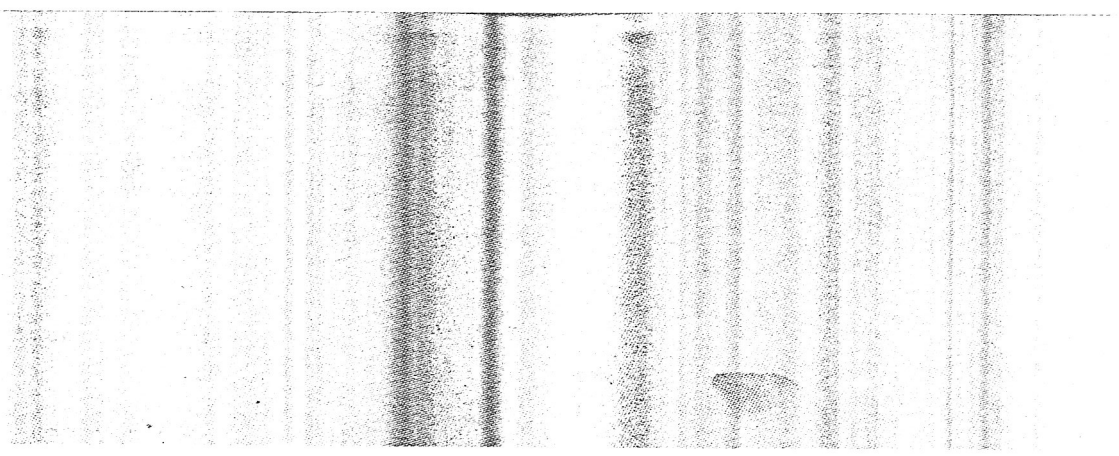
Of course, we can't subscribe to the idea that ignorance is bliss. But we now have an information overload.

Perhaps in our evolutionary makeup, we have never been fitted with the mechanism to cope with the amount of data flow that now comes to our brain. We're in a spiral of accelerated information. But it is one of the joys and burdens of journalism that we should provide a kind of selectivity function for the public. Journalism has always done that, but never more than today.

I remember when I got my first look at a big-city library with stacks of books, two-stories high, running into what seemed like infinity. It gave me a suffocating sense that if I lived to be a thousand and read all the time, I couldn't scratch the surface of knowledge.

Then I learned that it isn't important to remember all the facts, but that it is important to develop a sense of proportion, a sense of judgment and a sense of humor. These will then determine how well you will select the truly important facts and ideas.

McGee: Yes, we do try to do that, every day. But the selective process is hampered by many things. Availability of material, for example. You can't get all the news. That is something many people don't realize. The simple knowledge that something has happened often isn't available to us. Sometimes it is deliberately hidden from us. I often wonder, on any given day, what things are happening that are of crucial importance but of which we know nothing, or whose importance simply escapes us at the time.

How many stories are tucked away in archives? How many stories are the secret property of one person? How many world-shaking events never shake the world because they remain secrets? That's what makes reality so fascinating.

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